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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000122

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER PRESIDENT GEMAYEL RECEIVES
IRANIAN OVERTURE (S/NF)

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S/NF) On January 23, former President Amine Gemayel, father of slain Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayel, informed the Ambassador that the Iranian Embassy in Beirut contacted him last week to invite him to Tehran, with the hint that Iran would support him as president in order to resolve Lebanon's impasse. His sharply denied (but barely disguised) presidential ambitions duly awakened, Gemayel, who has maintained a dialogue with Hizballah for some months, stated he was "perplexed" by the unanticipated offer and wanted to know our views before he takes any action. (We told him to wait.) Concerning today's violent anti-government demonstrations, Gemayel stated that their effectiveness (and greatest danger) stems principally from the fact that Christian leaders Michel Aoun and Suleiman Franjeh were doing Nasrallah's dirty work for him. He believes the political cover of powerful Christian leaders for the pro-Syrian March 8th movement has allowed Hizballah and its Syrian/Iranian masters to paralyze the country and force Siniora's government to the brink. Gemayel acknowledged that at one point he thought Aoun could perhaps be brought back into the democratic fold, but he now believes the former general is irretrievable. Aoun is firmly in Hizballah's grasp and has ironically become its most ferocious supporter. In Gemayel's view, cross-Christian dialogue, long a goal of Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, is now dead. There is hope that members of the Christian community who are disillusioned with the tactics (and alliances) of Aoun could be persuaded to join the pro-reform movement, but that effort has to wait for the outcome of the current -- and perhaps final -- political crisis. End summary.

2. (C) Former President Amine Gemayel received the Ambassador and Special Assistant at his residence in Sin el Fil on the afternoon of January 23. Gemayel, still in mourning from the November 21 assassination of his son Pierre, was accompanied by his youngest son Sami, whom he hopes will assume the mantle of the Kataeb party organizer that his older brother held until his death. The Ambassador's motorcade was forced to take a lengthy route to the Gemayel residence due to the well-organized network of road blocks and roving gangs of March 8th supporters present along the main arteries of Beirut.

IRANIAN OVERTURE

13. (S/NF) Toward the end of the hour-long meeting, former President Gemayel leaned into the Ambassador and said he wished to speak about an extremely sensitive topic "off the record." He confirmed that we were aware that he met at regular intervals with senior Hizballah leaders, including Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Basically, Gemayel felt

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that some contact was essential to minimizing miscommunication, particularly as the country tried to extricate itself from its present political dilemma. What we probably did not know, he continued, and what had caught him off guard, was that the Iranian Embassy (presumably Ambassador Mohamed Sheibani) had contacted him last week with an invitation to meet with senior Iranian leaders in Tehran. Although specifics were not discussed, it was clear that the Iranian regime wanted to speak with him about Lebanon's presidency, one of the core elements of the current crisis.

14. (S/NF) The former president, who has been very supportive of March 14th's pro-reform agenda and whose martyred son was a rising star in the pro-democratic movement, said he was surprised and concerned by this sudden Iranian interest and wanted to know what we thought it could mean. He also asked our advice on how he should respond. Gemayel said he had also sought the advice of Saudi Ambassador Abdulaziz Khoja, who had not seemed surprised by the news and even "encouraged" Gemayel not to dismiss the opening.

15. (S/NF) Gemayel emphasized he has "never said he wishes to be a candidate" (not an easy thing for a Maronite with a political pedigree, especially one who once occupied Baabda

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Palace) and would always defer to the wishes of the Christian majority with regard to who should succeed Emile Lahoud as president. He also acknowledged that "numerous" parliamentarians had approached him in recent weeks to sound him out on his availability. Apparently seeking to allay any doubts about where his loyalties lie, he explained his commitment to Lebanon's sovereignty, as well as to the political and economic reforms that Siniora's government has attempted to implement.

16. (S/NF) Gemayel acknowledged that Iran's interest in him made him uneasy. He therefore wanted to proceed with caution, and if possible, with U.S. and Saudi support. Gemayel commented that his decades in regional and national politics had taught him that surface appearances and motivations with the Iranians were never the full story, and consequently he sought our advice. One concern was why the Iranians, and presumably Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah, would think his selection would be favorable to their cause. The former president said that in recent conversations, Nasrallah had given fairly strong indications that they felt Michel Aoun was far too mercurial to ever be entrusted with the presidency, but Gemayel was troubled that his candidacy would be acceptable to them. He did, however, point out that following the sacrifices made by his family and their generations-long commitment to Lebanon, he would like to be part of the solution. Additionally, he said, he understood the Shia community, who were an undeniable and permanent feature of Lebanon's political landscape. These and other factors compelled him to find out where this could lead.

17. (S/NF) Amine Gemayel stated he would proceed slowly and would do nothing prior to his planned visit to Washington in early February. The Ambassador cautioned him to be careful not to get trapped and advised him that at first blush, he could not see how the U.S. could support any initiative from Iran. We believe Iran should be isolated, and Gemayel would be lending his prestige to an unworthy partner. The Ambassador promised to consult with Washington and get back

to him as soon as feasible.

AOUN, BLINDED BY AMBITION, IS LOST

18. (C) Former President Gemayel, who has served Lebanon in the worst of times, was clearly distraught over current developments, with the rigid, scorched-earth tactics of the opposition once again threatening to push his country into sectarian strife. But what seemed most frustrating to the veteran politician was the deliberate assistance rendered to anti-democratic forces by the egotistical Michel Aoun, whom he scathingly referred to as the "Field General." (Always polite guests, we demurely did not remind Gemayel that he was the president who appointed Aoun as army commander and then interim prime minister, with such disastrous results.) At one point, he conceded, he thought Aoun could be persuaded by moderate elements in his Free Patriotic Movement to do what was best for his country. But today's events convinced him that the die had been irrevocably cast.

19. (C) He expressed incredulity that some Christians still supported the "excessively ambitious" Aoun, but hoped that at least it would peel away support from FPM's margins and steadily reduce Aoun's popular support. Ever the politician, he remarked that the Kataeb party, founded by his father Pierre Gemayel in the 1940's, was about to embark on a program of renewal and would attempt to attract these disillusioned Aounists.

110. (C) Gemayel said that he was certain that Michel Aoun and his senior hard-line lieutenants have personally received considerable funds from Iran. He pointed to the significant purchases of real estate by General Aoun and his son-in-law Gibran Bassil in the Christian enclaves of Rabieh and Batroun. Organizationally, he asked how could the newly-established Orange television station come up with USD 20 million worth of equipment and start-up capital except from cash-flush Iran. Gemayel drily observed that Aoun may be a political hostage of Hizballah, but he was an extremely well-paid and exuberant one. Nabih Berri, by contrast, is trapped but often seems to chafe in his handcuffs.

111. (C) Similar to opinions expressed by Jumblatt, Geagea,

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Siniora, Patriarch Sfeir, and others, Amine Gemayel said Aoun's blind allegiance to Hizballah was driven by his overwhelming personal ambition to be president. Gemayel, even though he is no stranger to political ambition, insisted it was the most severe example he had seen in his long years in public life. In his considered view, General Aoun will either attain the presidency or be consumed in the attempt.

THE OPPOSITION'S OBJECTIVES

112. (C) With the smoke from burning street barricades drifting up the hill, Gemayel stated that March 8th required two measures for victory: gaining the 1/3 plus 1 blocking minority in the Council of Ministers, and obtaining the concession of early legislative elections. The first measure was sought by Hizballah, because it would give them virtual control of national policy -- in both domestic and foreign affairs, including regarding the Special Tribunal. The second measure was the prize most desired by Aoun, since without a new parliament, he could never achieve the presidency.

113. (C) Gemayel acknowledged that Nasrallah has played his cards well, but never could have come to the brink of power without Aoun. Certainly, Hizballah's earlier assimilation of the Amal movement was important in creating a monolithic Shia constituency, but it was the confessional cover supplied by the Aounists (and to a lesser degree by the Christian supporters of Suleiman Franjeh and the Druse supporters of

Talal Arslan) that shielded Nasrallah from charges of leading an Iranian-sponsored Shia takeover.

WHAT STEPS CAN BE TAKEN

¶14. (C) Referring to A/S Welch's recent public warning to Michel Aoun to carefully consider the alliances he has formed, Gemayel asked if U.S. anti-terrorism finance laws could be used against Aoun, Franjieh, and their senior officers. Gemayel felt that such measures, even if only threatened, would serve as a sobering restraint on the now-confident members of the anti-government coalition. He said he has heard rumors that the U.S. was considering just such measures, and hoped the indications were true.

¶15. (C) A second powerful blow against the pro-Syrian forces would be rapid establishment of the Special Tribunal. He was certain that the reality of an empowered tribunal, working under the protection of the international community, would be an "ice cold shower" for both March 8th and the Syrian regime, and would give heart to embattled democratic forces. Finally, Gemayel urged Washington to continue its apparent "blacklisting" of Aounist visitors and supporters, accompanied by the clear message that there would be a real price for anti-democratic activities.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Gemayel's civil-war era presidency is not remembered fondly by the Lebanese. But he has re-emerged in public life as one of the arch 14 Christian leaders, and he impressed even his former detractors with the senior statesman role he took on to calm tensions after the murder of his son Pierre, the Minister of Industry, on November 21. Like so many things in Lebanon, what was unthinkable -- a second Gemayel presidency -- now seems possible. Most people agree that all signs are that he'd be far better the second time around. We do not believe that he would become a tool in the hands of Iran and Hizballah, and he is unlikely to be seduced by Syria (the country he is convinced is responsible for the murder of his son). When he comes to Washington, we hope he will get high-level visits (or at least photo ops), as a sign of support for March 14 and a public rebuke to those who murdered his son.

¶17. (C) But there is a bit of a naivete stemming from the peculiar combination Gemayel exhibits of ambition and mourning. He seems to think that, after so many others have failed, he might be able to get Iran on board for an independent Lebanon. As he promised to talk about a possible Iran trip with his partners (mentioning Walid Jumblatt,

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Marwan Hamadeh, Fouad Siniora, and Saad Hariri specifically), we would guess that we do not have to be the ones flinging cold water on the idea -- especially not after what was a truly awful day today, with Hizballah and Aounist roadblocks (combined with willful LAF passivity) intimidating most people into staying home.

FELTMAN